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**WASHINGTON, DC-** U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon took part in a Congressional hearing today focusing on the current public health conditions in post-Katrina and Rita south Louisiana. The hearing was held by the Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. Rep. Melancon, who serves as vice chair of the subcommittee, heard testimony from a broad spectrum of public and private healthcare providers from the New Orleans area, including St. Bernard Parish, who testified on the challenges patients face in obtaining basic healthcare, challenges facing hospital providers, and possible steps that could be taken immediately by Congress and other government officials to improve access to healthcare.

Following the hearing, Rep. Melancon commented, **"Over a year and a half has passed since Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast, and still our healthcare system in south Louisiana is in critical condition. Many hospitals are still closed. Those that are open are overwhelmed and their healthcare providers are stretched to the breaking point. The people of Chalmette, in suburban New Orleans, don't even have a hospital to go to anymore and instead have been lining up outside tents in a Wal-Mart parking lot hours before dawn to receive basic healthcare services. This situation should outrage all Americans, and I thank Chairman Dingell and Chairman Stupak for focusing the committee's attention, time and resources on our healthcare crisis in post-storm south Louisiana."**

Rep. John D. Dingell, Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, added, "Nearly 18 months after Hurricane Katrina, major problems remain on how to care for the region's many residents who are trying to rebuild their lives or return to their homes. I fear that we are on the verge of turning the Nation's largest natural disaster into the Nation's largest man-made disaster."

For more information about today's hearing, please visit the Energy and Commerce website: [http://energycommerce.house.gov/cmte\\_mtgs/110-oi\\_hrg.031307.katrina\\_health\\_care.shtml](http://energycommerce.house.gov/cmte_mtgs/110-oi_hrg.031307.katrina_health_care.shtml)

Rep. Melancon's introductory statement for today's hearing is below:

*I'd like to welcome all of our witnesses today and thank them for the time they have taken to come and testify. I'd also like to thank the chairman, Mr. Stupak, for dedicating the committee's time and resources to the Gulf Coast healthcare crisis. I am glad to see Congress take another step toward living up to the commitments we made in August of 2006 on the Katrina/Rita Task Force trip to the Gulf Coast.*

*It has been 19 months since Hurricane Katrina made landfall and almost 18 months since Hurricane Rita, and South Louisiana's healthcare system remains in crisis. There is no doubt that our healthcare system faces serious long-term challenges, but today we are here to focus our attention on the immediate needs. Our objectives are simple:*

*1.) We want to help enhance the region's capacity to take care of patients' immediate needs.*

*2.) We want to help the region demonstrate a level of care and quality that will bring our people back.*

*Achieving these objectives requires us to understand what resources are needed. Today's testimony will help the committee to grasp and meet those needs.*

*To explain the situation in detail is outside the scope of this opening statement. But just to give you some examples of the situation currently on the ground: Our primary caregivers are few and far between; hospitals are filled to capacity with many who have not received basic primary care in over a year; the number of uninsured have hit an all time high. In a recent Times Picayune article, the average wait time in the emergency room at Touro Infirmary was six-to-eight hours. That's about the same time it would take to drive from New Orleans to Houston or Atlanta. In Chalmette, Louisiana, there isn't even a hospital to wait in. Rather, people line up outside of tents to receive healthcare services that are still being provided in a Wal-Mart parking lot.*

*I hope that today's hearing helps us identify our short term challenges. I also want to use this opportunity for all the stakeholders in the region to sit down together and talk with each other rather than at each other. I want to remain focused on finding common ground. Everyone in*

*this room has been called to serve the people, either through medicine or public service. We should remain focused on the common ground of serving the people as we continue our conversations over the next several months.*

*I want to again thank the witnesses who have come today for their continued and dedicated service in providing healthcare on the ground, despite the personal hardships so many have faced after the storm. And I thank the Chairman for his persistence and tenacity. He has given me assurances that this subcommittee will revisit the Gulf Coast healthcare crisis as many times as need be, until we find solutions. I look forward to working with you to resolve this important issue and get our healthcare system back up and running the way it should be.*

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